

Physicians for
Human Rights



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August 19, 2016

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
Vice President of the United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

**Using Science and Medicine to
Stop Human Rights Violations**

Dear Vice President Biden,

In advance of your upcoming visit to Turkey on August 24, we are writing to share our urgent concern about the ongoing crisis in Turkey's southeast as the government's purge of suspected political dissidents in public institutions continues nationwide. In a report published August 9, titled "Southeastern Turkey: Health Care Under Siege," Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) details how Turkish authorities committed, and continue to commit, serious human rights violations in their pursuit of quelling unrest among its Kurdish minority.¹

Addressing ongoing human rights violations in the southeast, and impunity for past human rights violations, is an issue of importance to both the United States and Turkey, particularly if Turkey is to be accountable for upholding its obligations under international law, its nation's democratic institutions, and rule of law in the country.

We ask that you do all that is necessary to defend human rights for the people of Turkey, and in particular implore your Turkish counterparts to 1. Investigate the violations associated with the security operations in the southeast; 2. Immediately release and drop charges against all those wrongfully detained, imprisoned, or charged for exercise of their rights, and 3. Allow international monitors and other observers into the southeast.

In order to halt the ongoing loss of life and other serious human rights violations in the southeast, it is imperative that the Turkish authorities lift all indefinite sieges in cities with ongoing military operations, cease the militarization of hospitals and clinics, ensure safe and timely access for medics and ambulances into places under siege, and immediately and unconditionally release all health professionals charged with providing treatment.

Over the past year, Turkish security forces have deliberately and unlawfully imposed a virtual state of emergency across the country's southeast. That state of emergency has led to hundreds of civilian deaths and deprived urgent medical care to thousands of people. The current nationwide state of emergency in Turkey is an extension of the government's pre-existing crusade to consolidate power and eliminate political dissent.

¹ Christine Mehta, Önder Özkalipci. Southeastern Turkey: Health Care Under Siege. New York: Physicians for Human Rights, Aug. 2016, available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/southeastern-turkey-health-care-under-siege.pdf

PHR has documented the imposition of round-the-clock lockdowns in cities and towns in the southeast – home to the country’s Kurdish minority – and in particular revealed how government security forces interfered with health care and emergency services. Turkish authorities occupied hospitals, destroyed medical facilities, barred emergency vehicles from reaching the wounded, and punished doctors for attempting to treat those harmed in the ongoing conflict between the government and Kurdish fighters. Independent Turkish human rights groups say at least 338 civilians died as a result.

From July 2015 through May of this year, we found that Turkish forces imposed curfews 65 times in 22 districts and seven major cities. Across the southeast, PHR documented multiple instances of Turkish forces illegally militarizing hospitals, and PHR interviewed families whose loved ones died because ambulances were not permitted to pass through government checkpoints.

In Cizre, a town of 100,000 people, Turkish forces imposed a 79-day lockdown, shuttering all eight of the city’s health centers. Three facilities were subsequently destroyed. During that period, well over a hundred people died while hiding in basements in the city, and despite credible allegations that they may have been extra-judicially executed, Turkish officials bulldozed the buildings and have not pursued any investigations into their deaths. Turkish authorities barred PHR from visiting Cizre and have refused to allow access to domestic and international human rights groups and observers, including the United Nations.

It is critical that the United States speak out against Turkish authorities’ refusal to allow international observers into the region, a measure that has fueled suspicions that the Turkish government is destroying evidence of human rights violations committed in the southeast.

The United States should be a leader in upholding human rights and rule of law, including the right to life, health, freedom, and free speech and expression. Vice-President Biden, you have an obligation to raise these serious human rights concerns with President Erdoğan and advocate for the Turkish government to respect human rights, especially when faced with civil unrest. Human rights are the cornerstone of a strong and healthy society that upholds the rule of law, equality, dignity, and justice for all people.

We hope that this letter can serve as a basis for a constructive dialogue on these important matters. We are available to you should you require more information on the issues raised in this letter.

Thank you for your engagement in calling attention to rights abuses in Turkey. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Donna McKay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Donna" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "McKay".

Donna McKay
Executive Director

cc: Secretary John Kerry, Department of State; Ambassador John Bass, United States Embassy Ankara